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SUBJECT: SIX YEARS AFTER SADDAM, NEW HOPE IN JORDAN

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Classified By: Ambassador R. Stephen Beecroft
for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

[¶](#)1. (C) Summary: Six years after Operation Iraqi Freedom began in March 2003, our Jordanian contacts - among the analysts and officials - are evincing greater optimism about Iraq than the strained, highly-qualified hopes we were hearing just a few months ago (Refs A-C). The sustained security improvement coupled with the results of Iraq's late January provincial elections have been difficult for even the perennial skeptics to dismiss, though some gamely tried. Additionally, we have heard far less talk about how Iraq's leaders were merely feigning a shift away from Iran or from sectarianism. That said, concern persists that violent sectarianism and an Iranian resurgence may follow a U.S. troop withdrawal. Some Jordanians also voiced disappointment that Jordan has yet to reap substantive rewards from its increased bilateral engagement with Iraq. End Summary.

Provincial Elections, Stronger Central Government Lauded

[¶](#)2. (C) The January 31 provincial elections were to many of our Jordanian contacts the first unequivocally positive sign that Iraq was moving in the "right" direction, politically. With little to no prodding, some justified their optimism in terms that echoed U.S. talking points: it was a vote for national unity and a strong central government; a repudiation of Iran; a rejection of sectarianism. Some described these developments as a timely gift to a new U.S. President seen as bent on pulling out of Iraq. Former MP Husni Shiab, an international relations professor at Al-Isra' University, was uncharacteristically upbeat (in previous conversations he has accused the U.S. of deliberately empowering an untrustworthy Shia religious alliance). A one-time Iraq-allied Ba'thist himself, Shiab was encouraged by the perceived secular and nationalist outcome of the provincial vote. He attributed the results to anti-occupation trends that united Iraqis around an apparently serious U.S. intent to pull out.

[¶](#)3. (C) The host of a weekly current affairs program on Jordan television, Muhammad Al-Momani, lauded former Commanding General David Petraeus for having helped bring security, a smoother political process, and a retreat of Iranian influence. That paved the way for what he saw as newfound and healthy Iraqi assertiveness, even when it came to relations with Jordan: "In the past we viewed them as puppets - of the U.S. or Iran." He cited a purported verbal exchange between Iraqi Interior Minister Jawad Al-Bulani and GOJ officials, in which the Iraqi yelled at them for not letting Iraqis with Shia names into Jordan. Yasar Qatarneh of the Jordan Institute of Diplomacy was similarly bullish on Iraq's future, reading the election results as a statement that Iraqis are willing to trust Maliki. From his

perspective, Iraq was best served by Shia leaders - even those with history of Iran ties and Islamist leanings - because they were more authentic and representative, and therefore more legitimate. Qatarneh hoped Iraq would resume its status as a regional power able to balance Iran and compete with others like Egypt and Saudi Arabia, and thereby allow Jordan to operate according to its own interests in the space between.

¶4. (C) Beyond noting that a relatively free and fair vote was marked by increased Sunni participation and decreased violence, there were a handful of additional positive implications, according to Al-Quds Center for Political Studies Director Oraib Rantawi. Maliki was "the greatest winner," having tapped into an Iraqi desire for stability and unity through his State of Law coalition. While Iraqis had not lost interest in decentralization, they rejected partition and a weak central state. At its core the elections signaled that Iraq's division of power would not also mean a division of the state itself. He cast the returns as Iraqis asserting their Iraqi identity and refusing to subscribe to Iranian-style religious rule or otherwise succumb to Iranian influence. Finally, Rantawi saw the vote as a repudiation of the Kurds, who had "behaved after the war like a superpower in Iraq, like they did not have to listen to others." Rantawi saw signs that Iraqi democracy might be workable, that a nation could emerge with a new social contract on how Iraqis would self-govern, and that modern institutions and groups (political parties, civil society organizations, etc.) might complement or even supplant the "mosque and the tribe." He added, "Iraq could be a model for the region."

Officials Jump on the Bandwagon

¶5. (C) Optimism about Iraq was beginning to spread among Jordanian elites, according to Rantawi. Officials saw the positives of increased Sunni participation and the security gains, he said. Citing King Abdullah's initiative to ease the entry of Iraqis into Jordan and decreased public rhetoric about Iraqis being a drain on Jordanian resources, Rantawi judged that the GOJ was more relaxed about the threat of terrorism from Iraq. Momani observed that it was a measure of the improvements that the Iraq issue had dropped considerably lower on Jordan's radar. Indeed, our own conversations with GOJ figures revealed increased comfort with Iraq's progress and a noticeable decline in the frequency with which the subject is even raised with U.S. officials.

¶6. (C) The solid performance of PM Nuri Al-Maliki's affiliates in Baghdad and the South had diminished Shia advocates of a weak central government, according to Khaled Al-Qadi, Director of the Prime Minister's Political Office and a former Iraq hand at the MFA. He specifically cited the poor performance of the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq, whose leaders were "nurtured and bred in Iran, and were part of the policy of exporting the Revolution." Maliki had come to talk as though he were an Iraqi before a Shia, whereas the best one could say about ISCI's Abd Al-Aziz Al-Hakim was that he talks as though he were a Shia before an Iranian. Qadi was particularly pleased by the victory of former Ba'thist Yusif Majid Al-Habboubi in Karbala, where he outperformed the various Islamist factions. Highlighting the significance of a secularist winning in the holy Shia city, Qadi said, "there are nationalistic trends we can capitalize on." (Bio Note: Qadi is a 14-year career diplomat who, before starting at the Prime Ministry, worked Iraq issues at the MFA. He has recently also been seconded two days a week to the National Center for Security and Crisis Management where represents he the PM. His father - newly-appointed Interior Minister Nayef Al-Qadi - is of East Bank Bedouin stock; his mother is Iraqi Sunni. He speaks excellent English. End Bio Note.)

¶7. (C) Increased Sunni participation was heartening to Muhammad Al-Qara'an, Deputy Director of Arab and Middle Eastern Affairs at the MFA, though he was not convinced the elections demonstrated an identifiable new Iraqi sense of

common purpose. Still, in the parochial concerns and candidates that he felt dominated the results, he saw indications of a diminished Iranian ability to manipulate outcomes. Iraqis, in his view, "were not for any intervention of any other country." Whereas the Shia in the past had been somewhat unified over their opposition to Saddam, each party was now increasingly focused on its own interests. In his estimation, this had forced Iran to direct its attempts to influence at individuals rather than at parties or the Shia as a whole.

¶8. (C) Nawaf Al-Tel, who handles multilateral Iraq issues at the MFA, remained among our most pessimistic interlocutors, but even he grudgingly acknowledged progress. The provincial results gave him some hope that the parliamentary elections in December might reshape national politics along less sectarian lines, and he characterized Maliki as the first post-Saddam leader to accrue legitimacy and popularity. On bilateral Iraqi-Jordan issues, Tel saw little movement at all, lamenting that while Jordan had done its part in making a series of political overtures, Iraq had failed to reciprocate with fulfilling its economic promises. "We have done all we need to do. The Prime Minister is going to Iraq this month. My view is that there is a lack of Iraqi interest in taking relations with Jordan a step further."

Does Trouble Loom Beyond the U.S. Drawdown?

¶9. (C) Pleased as most of our contacts were about Iraq's current trajectory, some were reluctant to extrapolate the good news beyond the U.S. withdrawal. Would the positive momentum continue, or would Iran and sectarianism regain their footholds? Indeed, Isra' University's Husni Shiab argued that far from a repudiation of Iran, the new centralizing tendencies of Iraq's Shia reflected Tehran's efforts to consolidate its gains. Qadi considered it a mistake to believe the Iranians were "licking their wounds," and portrayed Iraq's eastern neighbor as the region's "smartest after the Israelis... they know where they are going and what they are doing." Qatarneh simply cautioned that Jordan must not "take its eye off the ball."

¶10. (C) MFA Policy Planner Omar Nahar described the mood at MFA on Iraq as generally good, but said he did not "favor a speedy withdrawal that will shake improving security." Qadi was more colorful, anticipating a "political tsunami" if U.S. forces left for the "wrong" reasons, and "political paradise" if they packed out for the "right" ones. He hoped that the Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) would prove the foundation for a lasting bilateral relationship on the security, economic and diplomatic levels. Maliki needed to take further strides toward national reconciliation (arguing that continued absorption of the Sunni tribal Sahwa Al-Iraq into government and the security forces was key), and he said Jordan is eager to assist in any way it can. For Momani, the U.S. had an obligation to leave behind a strong central government that was "partly democratic," respected human rights, and that would not become the backyard of Iran. (Note: Momani incorrectly believed that the President's recent announcement that 35,000-50,000 troops would remain in Iraq meant they would be there in those numbers beyond the terms of the SOFA - and was pleased by this. He appeared a bit taken aback when PolOff clarified that the U.S. was committed to withdrawing troops from Iraq by the end of 2011, and that the troop levels the President cited were the interim target for August 31, 2010. End Note.)

¶11. (C) Even as he acknowledged security improvements, Tel fretted that "the current status quo is as good as it gets." He saw a situation similar to conditions that prevailed in Lebanon from 1979-81, when the confessional groups were fortified in their areas, there was a semi-functioning political process, and the government gave the appearance of working - only for that to break down soon after. Referring obliquely to the disputes immediately following the provincial vote in Al-Anbar over purported irregularities, Tel posited that "after the elections there were 48 hours

where Sahwa Al-Iraq was going to turn into Al-Qaida." He predicted that the next big political battle would be between Maliki and the Kurds. On Maliki specifically, Tel worried that he was accumulating power in much the way Saddam did: "He's still playing everyone against everyone... He's got a divide and rule approach."

¶12. (C) Rantawi, among the more unabashedly optimistic on Iraq, emphasized that none of the positive developments he identified were irreversible. Speaking of the "many mines in the Iraqi field," he raised potential backlash from Shia groups that fared poorly in the recent balloting and raised the prospect of intensified Arab-Kurdish struggle, particularly over Kirkuk. Rantawi further said that the Iraqi state's ability to provide services for its people would be an important metric for gauging its success.

¶13. (C) University of Jordan Political Science Department Chairman Faisal Rfouh granted that "Maliki of today is better than Maliki of six months ago, and Maliki of six months ago was better than the Maliki of six months before that," but he insisted the U.S. stay until it rebuilt the Iraqi army as a secular institution, purged of sectarianism and free of Iranian influence. "The U.S. will one day leave, but Iran will never." Asked whether he envisioned Iraq again serving as the pointy end of the Arab spear against Iran - as it did during the 1980s when upwards of a million lives were lost in the Iran-Iraq War - Rfouh replied: "Yes, a million died, but at least you saved 300 million."

Comment: What a Difference a Year Makes

¶14. (C) Whereas last year our contacts typically would at best grudgingly accept that Jordan had to engage with a difficult and untrustworthy Iraqi Shia leadership, many today point to genuine good news. They noted that Baghdad had shown a sustained ability to project power outside the International Zone and cited growing evidence that the Iraqi public was shedding some of the destructive sectarian instincts that had wracked Iraq since 2003. Some were even open to the possibility that Iran's tentacles were not so numerous, long, or powerful as had been feared in terms of its ability to finely tune Iraq's destiny. For our interlocutors - and while we did not plumb the opinions of Jordan's senior-most officials, we spoke to many at the working level from a variety of institutions - there is now a foundation upon which to build in Iraq. The question on most people's minds appears to be whether this can last, especially as the U.S. draws down its forces. That said, the present optimism should provide domestic cover for Jordan to broaden the engagement with the Iraqi government that it began in earnest last year with the King's visit to Baghdad and Maliki's visit to Amman. End Comment.

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